



Specialty Treatments for Wood

An Online Continuing Education Course for Engineers

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John Galinski, P.E.

Introduction

Many specialty treatments can be applied to wood to either improve its performance or change its properties. Treatments addressed in this course are those that make permanent changes in the shape of a wood product, improvements in dimensional stability, or improvements in performance through combinations with nonwood resources.

Plasticizing Wood

Principles of Plasticizing and Bending

In simple terms, the wood cell wall is a composite made of a rigid cellulose polymer in a matrix of lignin and the hemicelluloses. The lignin polymer in the middle lamella and S2 layer is thermoplastic; that is, it softens upon heating. The glass transition temperature T_g of the lignin in the matrix is approximately 170°C (338 °F). Above the matrix T_g , it is possible to cause the lignin to undergo thermoplastic flow and, upon cooling, reset in the same or modified configuration. This is the principle behind bending of wood.

The matrix can be thermoplasticized by heat alone, but the T_g of the unmodified matrix is so high that some fiber decomposition can occur if high temperatures are maintained for a lengthy period. The T_g of the matrix can be decreased with the addition of moisture or through the use of plasticizers or softeners.

Heat and moisture make certain species of wood sufficiently plastic for bending operations. Steaming at atmospheric or a low gauge pressure, soaking in boiling or nearly boiling water, or microwave heating moist wood are satisfactory methods of plasticizing wood. Wood at 20% to 25% moisture content needs to be heated without losing moisture; at lower moisture content, heat and moisture must be added. As a consequence, the recommended plasticizing processes are steaming or boiling for about 15 min cm⁻¹ (38 min in⁻¹) of thickness for wood at 20% to 25% moisture content and steaming or boiling for about 30 min cm⁻¹ (75 min in⁻¹) of thickness for wood at lower moisture content levels. Steaming at high pressures causes wood to become plastic, but wood treated with high pressure steam generally does not bend as successfully as does wood treated at atmospheric or low pressure. Microwave heating requires much shorter times.

Wood can be plasticized by a variety of chemicals in addition to water. Common chemicals that plasticize wood include urea, dimethylol urea, low-molecular-weight phenol formaldehyde resin, dimethyl sulfoxide, and liquid ammonia. Urea and dimethylol urea have received limited commercial attention, and a bending process using liquid ammonia has been patented. Wood members can be readily molded or shaped after immersion in liquid ammonia or treatment under pressure with ammonia in the gas phase. As the ammonia evaporates, the lignin resets, the wood stiffens and retains its new shape. Plasticization of the lignin matrix alone can be done using chemical modification technologies, which are covered later in this course.

It is also possible to bend wood without softening or plasticizing treatments. However, the stability of the final product may not be as permanent as from treatments in which softening and plasticizing methods are used.

Bent Wood Members

Bending can provide a variety of functional and esthetically pleasing wood members, ranging from large curved arches to small furniture components. The curvature of the bend, size of the member, and intended use of the product determine the production method.

Laminated Members

At one time in the United States, curved pieces of wood were laminated chiefly to produce small items such as parts for furniture and pianos. However, the principle was extended to the manufacture of arches for roof supports in farm, industrial, and public buildings and other types of structural members. The laminations are bent without end pressure against a form and adhesively bonded together. Both softwoods and hardwoods are suitable for laminated bent structural members, and thin material of any species can be bent satisfactorily for such purposes. The choice of species and adhesive depends primarily on the cost, required strength, and demands of the application.

Laminated curved members are produced from dry stock in a single bending and adhesive bond formation operation. This process has the following advantages compared with bending single-piece members:

- Bending thin laminates to the required radius involves only moderate stress and deformation of the wood fibers, eliminating the need for treatment with steam or hot water and associated drying and conditioning of the finished product. In addition, the moderate stresses involved in curving laminated members result in stronger members when compared with curved single-piece members.
- The tendency of laminated members to change shape with changes in moisture content is less than that of single-piece bent members.

- Ratios of thickness of member to radius of curvature that are impossible to obtain by bending single pieces can be attained readily by laminating.
- Curved members of any desired length can be produced

Straight-laminated members can be steamed and bent after they are bonded together. However, this type of procedure requires an adhesive that will not be affected by the steaming or boiling treatment and complicates conditioning of the finished product.

Curved Plywood

Curved plywood is produced either by bending and adhesive bonding the plies in one operation or by bending previously bonded flat plywood. Plywood curved by bending and bonding simultaneously is more stable in curvature than plywood curved by bending previously bonded material.

Plywood Bent and Adhesively Bonded Simultaneously

In bending and bonding plywood in a single operation, adhesive-coated pieces of veneer are assembled and pressed over or between curved forms. Pressure and sometimes heat are applied through steam or electrically heated forms until the adhesive sets and holds the assembly to the desired curvature. Some laminations are at an angle, usually 90°, to other laminations, as in the manufacture of flat plywood. The grain direction of the thicker laminations is normally parallel to the axis of the bend to facilitate bending.

A high degree of compound curvature can be obtained in an assembly made up of a considerable number of thin veneers. First, for both the face and back of the assembly, the two outer plies are bonded at 90° to each other in a flat press. The remaining veneers are then adhesive-coated and assembled at any desired angle to each other. The entire assembly is hot-pressed to the desired curvature.

Bonding the two outer plies before molding allows a higher degree of compound curvature without cracking the face plies than could otherwise be obtained. Where a high degree of compound curvature is required, the veneer should be relatively thin (less than 3 mm (1/8 in.)) with a moisture content of about 12%.

The molding of plywood with fluid pressure applied by flexible bags of some impermeable material produces plywood parts of various degrees of compound curvature. In “bag molding,” fluid pressure is applied through a rubber bag by air, steam, or water. The veneer is wrapped around a form, and the whole assembly is enclosed in a bag and subjected to pressure in an autoclave, the pressure in the bag being “bled.” Or the veneer may be inserted inside a metal form and, after the ends have been attached and sealed, pressure is applied by inflating a rubber bag. The form may be heated electrically or by steam.

The advantages of bending and bonding plywood simultaneously to form a curved shape are similar to those for curved-laminated members. In addition, the cross plies give the curved members properties that are characteristic of cross-banded plywood. Curved plywood shells for furniture manufacture are examples of these bent veneer and adhesive-bonded products.

Plywood Bent after Bonding

After the plies are bonded together, flat plywood is often bent by methods that are somewhat similar to those used in bending solid wood. To bend plywood properly to shape, it must be plasticized by some means, usually moisture or heat, or a combination of both. The amount of curvature that can be introduced into a flat piece of plywood depends on numerous variables, such as moisture content, direction of grain, thickness and number of plies, species and quality of veneer, and the technique applied in producing the bend. Plywood is normally bent over a form or a bending mandrel.

Flat plywood bonded with a waterproof adhesive can be bent to compound curvatures after bonding. However, no simple criterion is available for predetermining whether a specific compound curvature can be imparted to flat plywood. Soaking the plywood prior to bending and using heat during forming are aids in manipulation. Usually, the plywood to be postformed is first thoroughly soaked in hot water, and then dried between heated forming dies attached to a hydraulic press. If the use of postforming for bending flat plywood to compound curvatures is contemplated, exploratory trials to determine the practicability and the best procedure are recommended. Remember that in postforming plywood to compound curvatures, all the deformation must be by compression or shear because plywood cannot be stretched. Hardwood species, such as birch, poplar, and gum, are usually used in plywood that is to be postformed.

Veneered Curved Members

Veneered curved members are usually produced by bonding veneer to one or both faces of a curved solid-wood base. The bases are ordinarily sawn to the desired shape or bent from a piece grooved with saw kerfs on the concave side at right angles to the direction of bend. Pieces bent by making saw kerfs on the concave side are commonly reinforced and kept to the required curvature by bonding splines, veneer, or other pieces to the curved base. Veneering over curved solid wood is used mainly in furniture. The grain of the veneer is commonly laid in the same general direction as the grain of the curved wood base. The use of crossband veneers, that is, veneers lay with the grain at right angles to the grain of the back and face veneer, decreases the tendency of the member to split.

Bending of Solid Members

Wood of certain species that is steamed, microwaved, or soaked in boiling water can be compressed as much as 25% to 30% parallel to the grain. The same wood can be stretched only 1% to 2%. Because of the relation between attainable tensile and compressive deformations, if bending involves severe deformation, then most of the deformation must be compression. The inner or concave side must assume the maximum amount of compression, and the outer or convex side must experience zero strain or a slight tension. To accomplish this, a metal strap equipped with end fittings is customarily used. The strap makes contact with the outer or convex side and, acting through the end fittings, places the whole piece of wood in compression. The tensile stress that would normally develop in the outer side of the piece of wood during bending is borne by the metal strap. A bending form is shown in Figure 1.

Selection of Stock

In general, hardwoods possess better bending quality than softwoods, and certain hardwoods surpass others in this quality. This is interesting from a theoretical point of view because hardwoods contain less lignin than softwoods. Hardwoods also contain much more hemicelluloses in the matrix than do softwoods. The species commonly used to produce bent members are white oak, red oak, elm, hickory, ash, beech, birch, maple, walnut, sweetgum, and mahogany. As stated, most softwoods have a poor bending quality and are not often used in bending operations. However, Pacific yew and yellow-cedar are exceptions to this rule. In addition, Douglas-fir, southern yellow pine, northern and Atlantic white-cedar, and redwood are used for ship and boat planking for which purpose they are often bent to moderate curvature after being steamed or soaked.

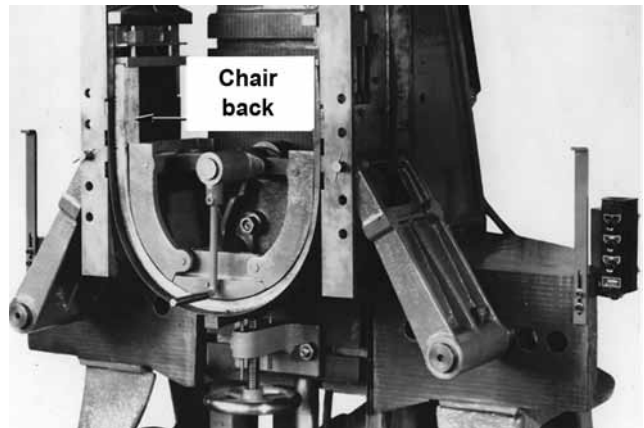


Figure 1. Chair back being bent through an arc of 180° in a bending machine.

Bending stock should be free from serious cross grain and distorted grain, such as may occur near knots. The slope of cross grain should not be steeper than about 1 to 15. Decay, knots, shake, pith, surface checks, and exceptionally light or brittle wood should be avoided.

Moisture Content of Bending Stock

Although green wood can be bent to produce many curved members, difficulties are encountered in drying and fixing the bend. Another disadvantage with green stock is that hydrostatic pressure may be developed during bending. Hydrostatic pressure can cause compression failures on the concave side if the wood is compressed by an amount greater than the air space in the cells of the

green wood Bending stock that has been dried to low moisture content level requires a lengthy steaming or soaking process to increase its moisture content to the point where it can be made sufficiently plastic for successful bending. For most chair and furniture parts, the moisture content of the bending stock should be 12% to 20% before it is steamed or microwave heated. The preferred moisture content level varies with the severity of the curvature to which the wood is bent and the method used in drying and fixing the bent member. For example, chair-back slats, which have a slight curvature and are subjected to severe drying conditions between steam-heated platens, can be produced successfully from stock at 12% moisture content. For furniture parts that need a more severe bend where the part must be bent over a form, 15% to 20% moisture content is recommended.

Bending Operation and Apparatus

After being plasticized, the stock should be quickly placed in the bending apparatus and bent to shape. The bending apparatus consists essentially of a form (or forms) and a means of forcing the piece of steamed wood against the form. If the curvature to be obtained demands a difference of much more than 3% between lengths of the outer and inner surfaces of the pieces, then the apparatus should include a device for applying end pressure. This generally takes the form of a metal strap or pan provided with end blocks, end bars, or clamps.

Fixing the Bend

After being bent, the piece should be cooled and dried while held in its curved shape. One method is to dry the piece in the bending mechanism or in a hot-plate press. Another method is to secure the piece and the form in a drying room. Still another method is to secure the piece with tie rods or stays so that it can be removed from the bending apparatus when the bent member has cooled and dried to moisture content level. Fixing devices can be removed and the piece

Characteristics of Bending

After a bent piece of wood is dried, the moisture content may change. An increase in moisture content may cause the wood to swell, which may bring about a gradual straightening of the piece or shrinking of the inner surface. However, an increase in moisture content may also cause lengthwise swelling or folding during the bending operation.

A bent piece of wood has a lower strength than a straight piece. However, the reduction in strength brought about by bending is usually not enough to affect the utility value of the member.

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